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General Assembly

Sixty-third session

Official Records

96th plenary meeting
Tuesday, 21 July 2009, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. D'Escoto Brockmann ..... (Nicaragua)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Wolfe (Jamaica), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Agenda items 44 and 107 (*continued*)

Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields

Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit

Report of the Secretary-General (A/63/677)

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations.

The Secretary-General: We meet on the eve of the General Assembly's consideration of my report on implementing the responsibility to protect (A/63/677). I welcome this discussion. Most of all, I welcome the prospect of advancing our efforts in this vital area that means so much to me and to the world's people.

In 2006, as Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea, and again last year as Secretary-General of this Organization, I visited Kigali to pay my respects at the memorial to the victims of the Rwandan genocide. Like so many others, I came away with renewed determination to do whatever is in my power to prevent such massive affronts to human dignity in the future.

This week, we have an opportunity to ready ourselves for the moment — and that moment will surely come — when our collective capacity and will are again tested by such horrors. We can save lives. We can uphold the principles on which this House is built. We can demonstrate that sovereignty and responsibility are mutually reinforcing principles. And we can assert the moral authority of this institution.

Four years ago, our heads of State or Government unanimously committed themselves to preventing genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, as well as their incitement. That universal and irrevocable commitment was made at the highest level, without contradiction or challenge. Our common task now is to deliver on that historic pledge to the peoples of the world.

My report offers some initial ideas on how to go about this. These proposals, not the world leaders' solemn commitments, are to be the focus of our deliberations this week. The question before us is not whether, but how.

From day one, I have made the patient work of turning lofty words into practical deeds among the highest priorities of my administration. In that spirit, it is high time to turn the promise of the responsibility to protect into practice.

The strategy outlined in my report, based on the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (resolution 60/1), rests on three pillars: State responsibility; international assistance and capacity-building; and

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timely and decisive response. Allow me to mention a few highlights.

First, the report seeks to situate the responsibility to protect squarely under the United Nations roof and within our Charter, where it belongs. By developing fully United Nations strategies, standards and processes for implementing the responsibility to protect, we can discourage States or groups of States from misusing these principles for inappropriate purposes.

Secondly, the report asserts that prevention, for practical and moral reasons, should be job number one. It offers a balanced and nuanced approach to prevention and protection that utilizes the full inventory of tools available to the United Nations and its partners. It seeks to spur thinking and policy development on ways in which the international community can support States in meeting their obligations in this area. And it stresses the need for preventive action, initially by subregional and regional arrangements, as envisaged in Chapter VIII of the Charter.

Thirdly, as called for at the 2005 Summit, we plan to engage Member States in a discussion about how to sharpen United Nations capacities for early warning and assessment. When prevention fails, the United Nations needs to pursue an early and flexible response tailored to the circumstances of each case. Military action is a measure of last — not first — resort and should be undertaken only in accordance with the provisions of the Charter. Moreover, armed groups and non-State actors must be held to the same standards for the responsibility to protect as States in territory under their control.

Finally, my report seeks to encourage each of the principal organs of the United Nations to play its distinct and appropriate role under the Charter in developing and implementing the responsibility to protect. I am glad to see the Assembly commencing the arduous task of building a consensus on the implementation plan.

I have listened carefully to members' concerns and expectations. My Special Adviser, Professor Edward Luck, has consulted widely. The report seeks common ground. It suggests a coherent strategy for moving forward. It offers questions as well as answers, because it aims to open — not close — this ongoing dialogue.

Today, members of the Assembly, I ask you to do three things.

First, resist those who try to change the subject or turn our common effort to curb the worst atrocities in human history into a struggle over ideology, geography or economics. What do they offer to the victims of mass violence? They offer rancour instead of substance, rhetoric instead of policy, despair instead of hope. We can and must do better.

Let us begin by admitting that there are no quick or easy answers. No region or social system has been immune from such mass brutality. No part of the world has a monopoly on wisdom or morality.

But let us also acknowledge that the responsibility to protect has emerged from the soil, spirit, experience and institutions of Africa. The Economic Community of West African States and the African Union gave institutional life to the principles of the responsibility to protect long before the World Summit did.

Now, regional arrangements on every continent are boosting prevention, early warning and protection capacities, each in its own way. Networks of survivors, scholars, advocates and practitioners have surfaced in every part of the world.

Four years ago, world leaders stood on the same side of the table and overcame whatever other political differences they may have had to endorse the responsibility to protect. They faced a common threat to their peoples and societies, to the rule of law and to the moral tenets for which this Organization so proudly stands — and faced it with resolve. Today, we owe it to the peoples of the world not to falter in this common quest.

Secondly, I ask you to let the Assembly do what it does best: provide the venue for a continuing search for common ground on a multilateral strategy that works. I see signs of convergence on the first two pillars of my strategy: on State responsibility and international assistance. But, as everyone expected, differences persist on some aspects of the third pillar, on response. We cannot expect to resolve all outstanding issues this week or next. But we can agree on ways to keep the dialogue going, building on what has been achieved and setting markers for the future.

In that regard, I draw your attention to paragraph 71 of my report. In 2005, the assembled heads of State

and Government stressed "the need for the General Assembly to continue consideration of the responsibility to protect" (*resolution 60/1, para. 139*). I could not agree more. My report offers a focused way to begin that conversation.

Thirdly, never forget why we are here. Never forget the victims of atrocities and crimes in so many places. They number in the millions. Those losses have permanently stained the history of the twentieth century. Together, in this century, we can chart a different course.

Never forget, too, the complacency and cynicism that often prevented this Organization from acting as early or as effectively as it should have. Our publics judged us then and found us wanting. They will be watching again this week, and they will — rightfully — judge us harshly if we treat these deliberations as politics as usual.

Three months ago, members of the Assembly commemorated the fifteenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide with prayers, songs, pictures and heartfelt tributes. It was a moving experience, shaped by the voices of the survivors. Their pain has not faded. Their memories are stark.

Just weeks ago, my Special Adviser witnessed columns of sombre Rwandans bearing to the mass burial sites in Kigali the coffins of victims discovered only recently. As their silent witness attests, this week's debate is not about history; it is about the character of this institution and the future of humankind. Please join me in the search for a better way.

The Acting President: I thank the Secretary-General for his presentation.

May I remind members that, as announced in today's *Journal*, there will be an approximately one-hour-long informal segment for questions and comments by Member States immediately following the adjournment of this meeting. May I also remind members that the formal debate on the report of the Secretary-General will take place on Thursday, 23 July 2009, at 3 p.m. in the General Assembly Hall.

The General Assembly has thus concluded this stage of its consideration of agenda items 44 and 107.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.